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Learning Disability, Thought and Theatre

Margaret Ames

Scene

The large studio theatre was filled with young rowan and birch trees that had been hung from the high rig to the floor, held in suspension so that movement on the floor rustled the leaves as if a breeze flowed through the room. Theatre lighting filtered through leaves and branches creating a semblance of dawn or perhaps early evening. The performers wore soft grey tops and trousers and grouped together in a loose cluster, placed centrally in a clearing in front of the audience. They occupied with a gesture presented to the audience as a recurring moment within the dance work they were performing. This gesture required them to hold the bridge of their noses between thumb and fingers and look up as if thinking intently about some-thing. Months earlier whilst working with colleague Andrew Evans who devised the work, we had named this gesture; 'the thinking nose' in a nod towards the famous sculpture 'The Thinker' by Auguste Rodin, whose monumental male figure rests his hand on his chin and looks down. According to the Rodin Museum the figure represents 'a free-thinking man'.¹ Much later in the 70 min of work the ensemble performed another gestural movement that collectively we named 'the stabbing hand'. It consisted of one palm held upwards whilst the fingers of the other hand made stabs downwards onto the palm in swift but steady rhythm. A colleague in the group asked what could the meaning of this movement be. She sought concrete reasons for abstract actions. Evans answered her query: 'it is the stabbing hand, it is the thinking, thinking about what I am thinking about'.³

Context

The diagnosis and condition of a learning disability signals a problem with cognitive processes. Questions arise from this: is capacity for thinking and for application of thought into socially appropriate action impaired? Is ability to think through concept and with sophistication limited? Might comprehension of basic tasks such as self care and management of daily life become compromised? The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) uses the terminology of 'mental retardation' and 'mental subnormality' in the diagnostic category of mental and behavioural disorders.³ These different categories are defined by IQ numbers. The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual characterises learning disability, here named intellectual disability, as a series of cognitive and mental function deficits.⁴ There is a general understanding that thought processes of people with learning disabilities are impaired. Conditions and symptoms of learning disability vary in severity between individuals and are not static states that belong to an individual and form their identity. Disability Studies scholars tend to agree on the social model and its antecedents, that finds that disability and in this case, learning disability is not a fixed category or mode of being. Ability, relationships and adaptation to the world are changing capacities. Diagnosis may suggest a stable category of person and existence. However, it is generally understood that learning disability is not static and social constructions play a large part in how people are perceived and understood. Elizabeth Purcell argues for presumed competence⁵ and Dan Goodley makes clear how understanding disability through the lens of normativity leads to people with learning disability being disabled by normative society and this further produces social oppression founded on disablism.⁶

Performance and Learning Disability

Discussing the work of Australian company Back to Back, Dave Calvert refers to a comment from an audience member and comments on how,

'...a concept of learning disability renders 'these types of people' incapable of decisive or controlling action within the making process. This observes a rigid binary classification which distinguishes people without learning disabilities from people with learning disabilities, along the respective oppositions of capacity and incapacity, controlling and controlled, agency and powerlessness, and active and passive'.⁷

The scenario described here continually asserts itself as the dominant discourse of what Calvert has described as, 'the static place of the void ordinarily filled out by learning disability'.⁸ Disability Arts is a rich field of practice and scholarship that has been growing since the late 1970s and the field of performance and learning disability refuses the reduction of people to the terms that Calvert critiques in his work as a scholar of learning disabled theatre. In *Theatres of Learning Disability* (2015), Matt Hargrave defines Disability Arts as,

an art practice that addresses the oppression of the disabled person; a mechanism for self advocacy and self governance; the cultural vanguard of the social model of disability; a cultural weapon to be wielded against the twin oppressions of mainstream culture and therapeutically aligned art; and a component in the struggle towards emancipation for disabled people.⁹

Hargrave examines the complexities of these varying fields of activism, scholarship, social agendas and artistic practices. His primary focus is on theatre made by people with learning disability and the challenge and contribution that this theatre might offer. It might be more than therapeutically beneficial, more than an occupational distraction and take its place in the contemporary theatre world as having aesthetic value. Hargrave raises a challenge for learning disabled artists, critics and audiences by arguing for, 'a new poetics, one that treats disabled identity as a more complex creative construction and privileges the appraisal of artworks as work, rather than an existential process'.¹⁰ Hargrave's suggestion for 'a new poetics' entails new ways of working between disabled and non-disabled individuals. In the 1990s, Giles Perring considered the collaborative processes of theatre work by learning disabled people with those without learning disabilities and drew attention to power relations between those with learning disabilities and the usually non-disabled facilitator. Calvert's description of a 'rigid classification' between those with and those without learning disabilities reveals persistent concerns about the relational dynamics involved. Perring offered three distinct approaches to this work, which he classified as 'Normalising', 'Post-therapeutic' and 'Countercultural'.¹¹ Of relevance, here is his explanation of the countercultural model that sees work by learning disabled people as a challenge to mainstream aesthetics and to views on disability. It sees value in non-normative or transgressive qualities. These qualities are exemplified in Yvonne Schmidt's in-depth analysis of the long-term experiment conducted by Swiss company Theater HORA. Freie Republik HORA is, she explains, 'a critical rethinking both of the disabled performer's agency and audience responses in theatre with and by artists with cognitive disabilities'.¹² This involves a different approach to the relationship between artists with learning disabilities and non-disabled colleagues. As is explained by Schmidt, there are a number of models whereby artists lead, or collaborate with learning disabled artists. She characterises this supportive relationship as a negotiation 'between autonomy and supporting structures'.¹³ Freie Republik HORA has taken this negotiation further and now work with-out non-disabled colleagues present. Schmidt proposes a 'Spectrum of Collaboration', a new model of understanding the different ways non-disabled collaborators support disabled artists. Her model outlines a five-step progression from the role of 'Organiser' through to that of 'Filter'.

At one end, the 'Organiser' arranges the necessary aspects that enable people to work together, such as a venue and a schedule, but has no artistic involvement. At the other end, the 'Filter', 'lets

the disabled artist improvise and shapes and filters their creative work'.¹⁴ The five steps she outlines might be used in combination and do not have any implied or pejorative meanings. Rather, it is the variety of relationships and the details of creative support that becomes a focus for understanding creative collaborations between people who require support and those who respond to those needs in the practice of making theatre.

In this essay, I discuss an example of theatre practice that, seen through Schmidt's model, moves between all five steps. However, I focus on the aspect of learning disability that is perhaps central to definitions of this category of impairment. I argue that despite diagnostic criteria and the actual complex reality of getting through a day with a severe learning disability, this does not preclude a person from thinking, and that thought becomes apparent through the process of devising theatre. If capacity for thought is in question in daily life, I argue that theatre might be the context where the sophistication of kinaesthetic poetics reveals a view of things that might not be articulated otherwise. I take up Maaïke Bleeker's notion of dramaturgy as a relational process of thought that is distributed between people in the process of creating performance. I set her idea of thought as 'material practice' that, 'proceeds through enactment' in the context of working with a dance-theatre artist with learning disabilities.¹⁵ I use Bleeker's thinking to frame embodied thought in ensemble work that might also bring further nuance to Schmidt's Spectrum and Hargrave's new poetics. *Cyrrff Ystwyth* are an ensemble of considerable longevity, having first formed in the late 1980s.¹⁶ Now as research participants, our work considers the aesthetic possibilities that emerge when following the lead of colleagues with learning disabilities. Andrew Evans joined the work at the start and has performed in most pieces. It was not until 2015 that he felt he was ready to author his own work. The process and final performances of this work both example Bleeker's findings and speak back to her notion of dramaturgy as thought that belongs to no-one, via this creative project that foregrounded the importance of an individual's thought. Given that diagnostic criteria for learning disability might call into question the validity of an individual's thought, or that in certain social and medical contexts, such a diagnosis invalidates the capacity for sophisticated thought, following the direction of a choreographer with such a disability signals from the outset an intention to enter a new territory of thought and aesthetic action. Here I attempt to account for how the project brought new insight into understanding the creative process of an ensemble and how it was another example of learning disability as particularly resistant to diagnostic reification. The profound thoughts that were offered via action become evidence of new aesthetic horizons beyond the terms of social benefit that refers back to Hargrave's call for a new poetics.

In taking this work seriously as a contribution to theatre, I seek a deeper political understanding of both learning disability and theatre aesthetics. I hope that this approach might respond in affirmative ways to Sarah Gorman's concerns about theorizing work by people with disabilities in ethical ways.¹⁷ She discusses Jérôme Bel's collaborations with Theater HORA and Candoco Dance Company and highlights ethical and social dilemmas that are embodied in the performances of people 165 who are untrained dancers, working within Bel's pre-determined dramaturgical structures for *Disabled Theater* (2012), with Theater HORA and *The Show Must Go On* (2014) with Candoco. Gorman highlights important issues that emerge in the context of contemporary theatrical concerns with performing failure. She makes clear how the aesthetics of failure found in the work of, for example, *Forced Entertainment*, are actually founded on 'compulsory able bodiedness'.¹⁸ She points out that for performers who are differently able this aesthetic is extremely risky. However, in contrast to Gorman's address to the ethical problems of untrained performers who might be, 'chosen to show what they can or cannot do and their work on stage runs the risk of being brought in to the service of a philosophical discourse about representation in the age of postmodernity',¹⁹ I argue that work created by people with learning disabilities that is performed by others, of all abilities contributes to a critique of ableism as Gorman points out, but also reveals new choreographic and aesthetic possibilities that sidestep constructions of bodies and abilities and gives the lie

to the notion that people with learning disabilities cannot think and must always represent, in some way, the abject other. Here, juxtaposing two examples; a work performed by people with learning disabilities and created for them by people without, and the main case study of a work by performed by a mixed group of people with disabilities and without, created by a person with learning disabilities, forms the basis for my argument that to make theatre and dance that is thought through disability is to produce an alternative to our perception of virtuosity versus amateurism. While I am aware of the social importance of agency produced through thought, this is not my focus and instead the aesthetic proposal of Maaïke Bleeker's sharing of the thought that belongs to no one and is everyone's is central. The theatre making discussed here thinks about specific issues through the actions and bodies of its performers. I suggest that theatre as a thinking mechanism might produce a place for people with learning disabilities to engage in academic, political and aesthetic discourses. French company L'Oiseau-Mouche, offer an example of freely circulating, embodied thought that is made concrete through the bodies of the performers in *Pourvu Qu'on Ait L'ivresse* (2015). This work was performed at Crossing The Line Theatre Festival (2017) in Roubaix, France, and was performed by people with and without learning disabilities.²⁰ It might be relevant to say that I made no distinction between performers with regards to their impaired or non-impaired cognitive conditions and in fact, could not observe clear differences between individuals. *Pourvu Qu'on Ait L'ivresse* began with a startling action. A woman stood in the centre of an arena covered in green baize. The audience sat on raised areas. Also covered in a continuous spread of the same green baize, forming an arena reminiscent of a snooker table, perhaps a bowling green, or maybe a football pitch. The woman in the centre had wrapped her arms around a huge bunch of instantly recognizable Pick-Up-Sticks. They were giant, in circumference and height, dwarfing her. She stood very still until smoothly and swiftly opening her arms and stepping backwards letting these mammoth stakes fall outwards and crash to the floor. The sticks fell, just missing her. A precise assessment of distance, expenditure of energy and balance signalled the start of a game of Pick-Up-Sticks conducted by the performers using their whole bodies, rather than just their hands. They circled, lay down, hovered over the top, wriggled up close and paced at a distance, carefully assessing how to move each stick away from the pile without disturbing the others. This game of spatial awareness, of dexterity and skilful assessment of potential outcomes of each movement was played using the whole body, making thought processes apparent. As they progressed in silence, so they began to change the use of the sticks to create images that extended the play into dramatic scenarios. They posed with stakes angled as if to penetrate through their bodies in positions not dissimilar to classical images of war and revolution: Goya's series of etchings, *The Disasters of War* came to mind. They lay down on top of piles, as wounded, as dead bodies that then carefully re-animated to move to a new position and continue the game. All these images created through careful postural shifts combined with the continuation of the task to remove all the sticks without disturbing the remaining pile, revealed a material performance of independent thought that circulated between them all. Later on, they took up large scissors and began to cut random shapes into the green baize, destroying the environment of their work. They busied themselves about the business of careful pattern making, not thoughtless, but a thoughtful dismantling via the precision of cut-ting with scissors rather than a more aggressive rip and tear. Each new pattern emerging from the newly defined gaps in the green covering suggested creation, concurrent with the act of destruction: a thoughtful, physical relation with material, energy and change.

Theatre as Thought

Maaïke Bleeker is particularly clear about the notion of theatre as thought as she recruits Deleuze and Guattari to suggest that theatre might move beyond representation of thoughts that are expressed by certain characters or theatrical subjects and be understood instead as a distinct practice of thought and thinking that is shared between theatre and its audiences.²¹ She follows a Cartesian inheritance to find. 'that the "I" that is the subject of our thoughts is not the self that does

the positing', 'We are being thought rather than thinking'.²² If theatre thinks, what thoughts do practitioners with learning disabilities reveal through their chosen themes and embodied responses? Dramaturgical process, embodied memory, migration of thoughts and ideas into physicality and the relationship between dramaturgy and thinking/feeling are propositions for furthering this enquiry. Collaboration and relations between choreographers, dramaturgs and audiences are the essential aspects of theatre as thought: we think together. Central to this investigation is Bleeker's notion of 'thinking no-one's thought'. Using this concept, I propose an addition to Schmidt's Spectrum of Collaboration.

Pourvu Qu'on Ait L'ivresse was created for L'Oiseau-Mouche by choreographer Latiffa Laâbissi and scenographer Nadia Lauro, neither of who have learning disabilities. Gwdihw (2016), the piece I will now consider, was created by Andrew Evans, who has a learning disability. Bleeker's thought that belongs to no-one but circulates as everyone's is exemplified in both works. Both pieces offer examples of the poetics of embodied thought. Andrew Evans however was the choreographer who opened up a circulating process of thought as action, between performers. Later this circulation of thought was opened to the audience, as was Pourvu Qu'on Ait L'ivresse. It seems important to consider thoughtful practice as it comes from a person not credited with the intellectual capacity required to make art, in the same way that artists without learning disabilities are credited with artistic integrity. In what follows I attempt to reveal how a creative collaboration is a concrete example of Bleeker's dramaturgy as the thought that belongs to no one and that via this thought Calvert's void of learning disability is filled through a theatre making practice.

Practice

Between Autumn 2015 and Summer 2016, we worked with him to create his first full length work.²³ He offered his title Gwdihw (Owl) in the summer of 2015 and brought one gestural moment as the key to whatever else would follow to the first rehearsal in the October: His fingers held in semi formed circles up against his eyes. In the October, I did not know anything about his ideas, his motivation or his reasons for making this proposal. When I asked him what he was thinking about the owl, he performed the gesture. This was a direct quote from what I remember as a moment of play in the devising process from our work together back in 1999. It was never actually used within the final piece. It reappeared 16 years later as an insistence on an embodiment of owl, but also as a reference to repertoire, signalling the persistence of memory. Ein Hanes (Our History or story) was the title of this 1999 work that has no documentation remaining. I recall that the work looked at individual performer's memories. Bleeker, writing about dramaturgy in dance states:

*Creating things together means producing thoughts that would not have been there without the thinking of all the individuals involved in the creative process. Yet once created, these thoughts exist somehow independently from each of those individuals, and as a consequence of how the work has materialized between them. How can we begin to conceive of thoughts as autonomous entities materialized in a medium?*²⁴

In beginning his work for Gwdihw, it was immediately apparent that fingers shaped in semi formed circles and held close to the eyes was an autonomous thought, independent from us and somehow from Evans, yet recruited by him as a signifier. It was an example of an autonomous thought transposed from another time into that present moment, intact and coherent. At that first moment, it seemed to signify the theme and the intention. Quickly this direct link to the past became a recurring citation. Evans began to speak about this piece Ein Hanes: 'Do you remember?' 'When...' 'what we did...' 'gwdihw' 'Do you remember?'²⁵

He seldom speaks with complete sentences as he struggles with vocabulary and with connecting phrases. He referred to the venue, Theatr Felinfach, an important theatre in the middle of the county. He located the work, he prompted my memory, he re-inserted the past into our present work. I remembered how during the process of creating *Ein Hanes*, Evans was clearly unhappy. He refused to perform certain actions and he disrupted sessions. During a rehearsal, I asked if something had happened that he could not talk about and if he would make a solo about it. What emerged between us is still talked about today by his father and others who were in the audience. He gave this solo a title *Mae'n Wir* (It's true).

In 2016 working on *Gwdihw* he referred to this solo many times. So, I brought the same music to the rehearsal and asked if he wanted to make 320 a new solo. If as Bleeker says, 'a performance is not a thing but exists only as a dynamic set of relationships',²⁶ then Evans created an embodied insertion of memory into the dynamics of *Cyrff Ystwyth*, pulling the past into those moments that then produced new relationships with audiences. This did not consist of the materials of the thing we once made, and neither did it consist of that present moment of making. It was a manifestation of and was about, the dynamic set of relations at work. It referred directly to the company but also seemed to stand as a referent to the larger sphere of social relations. Here, performance was extended relation, not a thing of and in the moment, not an archive external to the body. It resided within the body. In this way his original enquiry was extended and each performance we have made since 1999 has been part of this extended interrogation of experience and body; where affect and action reside. This repertoire is one of gesture and theme, which he manifested through improvisation intended for choreographic material. Always the same process occurs between us. I ask the leader of the project what they are thinking about the title of their project, or I ask about the reason for their choice of title. In response, they move rather than speak. Verbal language is elusive and confusing to some colleagues. The ensemble follows closely, learning these embodied thoughts and transposing them into their own physicalities. This is both an extension of Schmidt's *Spectrum of Collaboration* and example of Bleeker's thoughts materialized and shared in free circulation.

Whilst Bleeker argues that dramaturgy is an attempt to 'think no-one's thought',²⁷ these dynamic relationships between bodies and memories, of past and present were precisely Evans' thoughts that we then took up and attempted to think alongside him. I took up what I understood as his thoughts and attempted to elucidate them. This process might be framed as moving between Schmidt's *Artistic Collaborator* and *Framer* roles in her *Spectrum for Collaboration*.²⁸ However, I experienced the process as more akin to Bleeker's description of the dramaturg in action. She argues for a process of 'thinking-in-between'²⁹ whereby those that create the theatre know they are doing this for an audience and how what they do produces thought in the audience about the very process that occurs before us in the theatre. Thinking no-one's thought happens because audiences and theatre makers interact through the actual process of theatre performance. This is an active and live process in the moment of relation between audience and the work.

In this interaction, there is challenge. For audiences to think-in-between with the thoughts of a person with a learning disability, to interact with such thoughts as embodied propositions is a challenge 360 because they are produced via visible radical difference that is under-stood as lack. Hickey-Moody identifies the medical model that makes no mention of 'specific skills'³⁰ 'No consideration of what people with disabilities might offer contemporary cultural formations'.³¹ Bodies may be inscribed with disability but that does not mean that experience 365 is lessened, or relationship dulled, or desire and disgust and urgency and joy felt otherwise. Licia Carlson states that people with learning disabilities, 'have been marginalized in philosophical discourse',³² that in historical and contemporary contexts learning disabled people are excluded from full membership of the category of person. If so, then it may be a pressing issue in making theatre, to take an oppositional stance to Bleeker and for a person with learning disabilities, this person Andrew Evans,

to think his thought and his alone. Theatre here becomes a medium for the expression of self, or personhood, which is doubted when framed within diagnostic systems and legal definitions of competence. However, by removing a further frame of creative self expression as beneficial, and instead focusing on the material and ensemble processes, thought, as circulatory becomes evident, even if produced and initially owned by a particular individual. The free circulation of embodied thought that alters and produces nuanced responses via the bodies 380 of those who compose the ensemble might then counteract the social and clinical effects of diagnosis and divisions between those of us with full bodily and cognitive capacity and those of us with apparently less.

The thought that belongs to no-one, can be allied to Roberto Esposito's analysis of community as a nothing, as a vacuum.³³ One is not part of a community, rather one is in a perpetual dynamic of obligation towards the Other and a retreat from the Other that immunizes us against contagion by that Other. Carlson has examined historical precedents for absolute immunization against people with learning disabilities that leads to exclusion and abuse.³⁴ In contemporary contexts, Briant, Watson and Philo discuss how the media represent people with learning disabilities stating that groups need scapegoats and society has now deemed people with disabilities as the, 'new folk devils'.³⁵ Exclusionary practices pave the way for practices of inclusion. For people with learning disability, rather than the hierarchical effects of inclusion into a presumed desirable community of non-disabled competent subjects, embodied thought in action crosses the immunitary boundary between people and is offered as the munus; the giving that, 'assigns one to the other in an obligation'³⁶ and that, 'decentres the proprietary subject, forcing him to take leave of himself, to alter himself'.³⁷ The thoughts that circulated between us, initially given to us by Evans alone, were responded to by the ensemble in recognition of our work together as founded on obligations between us. This filling of the void between immunized individuals was enacted through embodied thinking that bypasses the premise of inclusion and instead is more akin in practice to Hickey-Moody's description of Restless Dance Company's working method: 'reverse integration'.³⁸ She makes a vital distinction between practices of inclusion and this company's particular practice that recognizes that learning disability has its own aesthetic values. In common with my own findings, 'RDC works to do more than simply "include" dancers with intellectual disabilities by employing a movement-based methodology that is the articulation of two concepts, "cultures of intellectual disability" and "reverse integration", that according to her, "offer an alternative to the notion of merely including young people with intellectual disability because they have been developed through the work of dancers with intellectual disability and therefore foreground their personal styles".³⁹ In the work under discussion here, I would go further and suggest that the thinking we do together in Cyrff Ystwyth is more concerned with making proposals from cultures of learning disability to contemporary dance-theatre making and aesthetics. This is in contrast to Hickey-Moody's understanding of how RDC challenges assumptions about inclusion, which is a vital argument. The work of RDC and Hickey-Moody's analysis of their work and its dynamic significance to people with learning disabilities is crucial. However, I suggest that in Gwdihw, cultures of learning disability are the vehicle for the audience to think in between Evans' thought as autonomous entities that materialized in the process and performance and in Bleeker's terms, to 'grasp the logic of the proposition presented by the performance'.⁴⁰ This proposition then augments the joint endeavour between performers and audience to illuminate something about knowledge and specificity that stands beyond definitions of normativity and disability. Hickey-Moody offers later insight into how we have learnt to understand the others that is represented in learning disability:

The idea of 'intellectual disability' has become a way of knowing and categorizing bodies. However, it is an idea that describes a mind and not a body. If the mind can be seen as embodied and articulated in sense-perceptions, emotions and memory, then the abstract definition of 'intelligence' that is effected by the idea of 'intellectual disability' can be quite removed from the material and sensory

knowledges that are of importance when considering bodies who are categorized as 'intellectually disabled'.⁴¹

Here she draws attention to the barrier of diagnosis that theatre and dance practices may have no need of. That we might possibly dispense with the need for theatres and dance practices of learning disability and take on board theatre and dance that extend our thinking together without boundaries of capacity and propriety seems to emerge with her argument. That might be understood as an aesthetic proposition.

Investigators into embodied knowledge support Bleeker's analysis of the work of the dramaturg who attends to 'thoughts that move'.⁴² Maxine Sheets-Johnstone considers the totality of corporeality and thought in her analysis of dance improvisation. Sheets-Johnstone notes that, 'at the same time that I am moving, I am taking into account the world as it exists for me here and now in this ongoing, ever-expanding present'.⁴³ We also bring into improvised action the world as it once was, now archived within the body, and respond to the present with previously established neural pathways. Memory can be reactivated, re-processed through the body and offered as an account of the world as we experience it; a weave of past and present. Vida Midgelow understands memory and perception as vital aspects of knowing and comprehending the world, rather than understanding improvisation as a process of new invention without precedence. She argues that, 'In body memory the emphasis is less upon an act of recollection from the present back to the past and more upon an ongoing re-enactment of the past within the course of the body's performance'.⁴⁴ She discusses the improviser's source material, their body memory, as 'habits in the body',⁴⁵ but they are not clichéd movement as the dancer brings them to consciousness and crafts them in response to the here and now. Sheets-Johnstone finds the possibility of daily life consciously entering the improvised dance but she is careful to explain that such inclusions are not making the dance about something (not a mimetic endeavour). She challenges any idea that movement might be bound to language, so she frees thought from language situating it in the body. For her, movement is not symbolic, it does not stand in for language – it is its own, and belongs to its own order. Midgelow and Sheets-Johnstone argue for an embodied form of communication. Carrie Noland insists kinaesthetic and somatic experience, 'exerts a force on language all its own'.⁴⁶ For her, thinking through gesture is agency – as embodied language.

If as Sheets-Johnstone argues we 'reify thinking in this exclusively linguistic or more broadly, symbolic manner' we deny, 'a fundamental form of expression'.⁴⁷

Contemporary dance theorists and dramaturgs agree that dramaturgy is a collaborative endeavour. Christel Stalpaert writing about L'opera Begue by LOD in Ghent considers this particular piece to be an example of, 'a dramaturgy of failure'. Its theme considers ability and disability (although there are no performers with disabilities and the themes are allegorical, inspired by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; Begue in English means to stutter or stammer). She argues that the work, 'Comments on who has the ability to see and the talent to speak in society'.⁴⁸ The dramaturgy of failure in this work produces a critique of standards and concludes that, 'dramaturgy moves from solid ground and cognitive thinking to a dramaturgy of the body that is political'.⁴⁹ This is dramaturgy as political. Andre Lepecki, always concerned with a challenge to dance that has the political at its heart comments on his understanding of dance dramaturgy as positioning the dramaturg as, 'a subject who is supposed to know'.⁵⁰ He interrogates the tensions between the dancers/choreographers and the role of the dramaturg and gives an account whereby the supposed knowledge of the dramaturg must be destroyed. The collaboration must proceed via a process of error. He makes a case for, 'authorial desire' as a force that brings together disparate bodies, ideas, responses and gestures etc.

The dramaturg in Lepecki's terms works between the choreographer's authorial desire and is the one who discovers the 'work itself' as an entity, 'Dramaturgy as erring practice dis-covers that it is the work-to-come that owns its own authorial force'.⁵¹ This erring and failure is the method by which the work comes into its own being. Attempting to follow and understand Evan's movement repertoire inevitably found me astray and in error. However, if in the case of Gwdihw the gestural repertoire that was the scaffold upon which new expression was built was not itself error but deliberate citation and reiteration from the past then to understand it I turn to the notion of migration of gesture.

Deidre Sklar refers to Edward Casey's take on body memory and memory of the body. She explains that Casey argues, "We should speak of immanence rather than 'intersection'...immanence of the past in the present and the present in the past".⁵² Ness resolves this difficulty of the past and present as interwoven by arriving at the proposition that for the dancer, gesture is virtual. Here she draws on Suzanne Langer's argument for dances gesture and movement that may come from daily behaviour but is not art, 'Only when it is imagined apart from the momentary situation is it art. Then it becomes 'free symbolic form' or 'virtual gesture'... 'The movement of the gesture becomes itself a realm that can accommodate migration'.⁵³ I propose that such a migration might be from the past into the present and offer an embodied archive that is a repertoire of free symbolic form that challenges linguistic expression and evidences thought as kinetic rather than verbal. But that also, following Ness the communicative power of gesture depends on the body creating it and the emplacement of that body.

The disability diagnosed as pathology that Evans' mind/body habitus suggests, makes ambiguous the legitimacy of his embodied thinking. It is the thinking of the generic category of learning disability, the 'they' and 'them' that those of us without such a disability refer to, as if 'they' might be a set of identical symptoms which define personhood, rather than the thinking of a specific individual or artist. Licia Carlson makes this point clearly:

*Intellectual disability is considered a case study with respect to concepts like personhood and justice, and members of this group are discussed in the abstract, rather than through an examination of concrete practices and the social and political context in which this group is situated.*⁵⁴

The question is increasingly asked: What is interesting aesthetically to audiences who watch theatre and dance by people with learning disabilities? Are audiences interested in theatre as a means of addressing personhood and justice? Or, might the concrete practices of theatre and dance produce the aesthetic challenge that broadens our aesthetic appreciation and our aware-ness of the political potential of the aesthetic? How do we assess such work, how do we know if it does make an aesthetic contribution or if it is in fact, poor work? If as Carlson argues, those of us with intellectual or learning disabilities are marginalized from philosophy, then so too within the arts as the discourse of benefit excises artists from their authorial force, though as this case study examples, not necessarily form their authorial desire. The project we engage in moves along the grey line between the desire for that authorial force and its therapeutic value. The circulating energy of an ensemble maintains creative focus that does not foreground Otherness, other than through variety of how each is entirely other to everyone. Further, the power of Carlson's argument is found in action, in the practiced choreography of each work. She suggests that if we engage with people with learning disabilities in ways that extend the gaze and the apprehension of a person through visual acknowledgement we may all find a new freedom of relations between those identified as Other and our own normative driven comprehensions. She suggests radical approaches to engage across the immunitary divide. Rather than simply see, we might, 'find new dimensions of being beside the other, in the presence of the other, and explore the power of touch, of the embrace – both literally

and metaphorically – in relation to intellectual disability'.⁵⁵ Embodied acts, gestural communications, the moved iterations of dance-theatre offer further means of 'being beside the other' and at the heart of this is Bleeker's notion of the thought that belongs to no-one and is thought by everyone.

I argue that Evans' work was made through a mindful body that draws upon Bleeker's dynamic relations. The aesthetic resonance of his work in his embodied presence and precise articulations of gesture and posture emerged through his precise and singular personhood. Nevertheless, this person is drawing on relationships within a communal context over time and such singularity draws attention to his emplacement, which in Esposito's terms is a void. *Communitas* is thought and felt through theatre as exposure which prompts the obligation to offer; gift; the gift of thought in theatre. He/we are exposed to each other, and, 'Exposure which pushes him into contact with what he is not, with his "nothing", is the most extreme of its possibilities but also the riskiest of threats...'.⁵⁶ We seem to need immunity from disability, the other, the shadow, that here is gifted to us and draws attention to our obligatory relations to each other over time.

The aesthetics of disability compellingly argued by Tobin Siebers suggests that disability is an aesthetic. It does not stand apart as a disciplinary practice or subject proper only to people with disabilities. He states that disability, 'participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel'.⁵⁷ Provocatively he asserts that, 'Disability is now and will be in the future anaesthetic value in itself'.⁵⁸ The bodily appearance, choreography and movement qualities Evans brought to us produced a close weave of constructions of normal and not normal, as problem apparent through difference. His retention of the past through kinetic memory, re-draws aesthetic boundaries of normality. Siebers raises the question at the heart of the problem with reference to sculptor Judith Scott, 'The problem of course, is that Scott did not possess the intelligence associated with true artists by the tradition of art history. What kind of changes in the conception of art would be necessary to include her in this history?'.⁵⁹

Conclusion

In 1999, Evans did not have the language to communicate his experience and thinking, other than two words: 'Mae'n wir' (It's true). In 2015/16, he returned to this time, communicating his thoughts kinaesthetically. Early on when asked why he wanted make a work about owls he answered: 'because it tells the truth, y "deryn sy'n dweud y gwir" (the bird that tells the truth). This telling the truth was his authorial force and desire. Ness analyses the inscription of gesture and finds that: "...if we are going to look for the inward moving tendencies of danced gesturing, we might do better to look at the mark they leave not upon the space surrounding their actions or the eyes watching them but upon the bodies that are their medium".⁶⁰ Later she elaborates on the dancer's gesturing body, "It is a living, historically informed, continuous movement of gestural practice. Its tissues are structures that mould and are moulded by thinking in action".⁶¹ I suggest that *Gwdihw* is a gestural practice that examples Ness' thinking and tells the truth. It transmits knowledge and asserts both the symbol of the owl as wise and also the inscription of personal experience that becomes incorporated into the body: the thinking nose and the stabbing hand were examples from 70 min of choreography forged largely from gesture. As such, disability has no special claim. The authority of this embodied knowledge however is that it is disseminated in performance that has been brought to our attention by a person with learning disabilities and who therefore stakes an audacious claim to his personal authorial force and its relevance to the rest of us. This then concerns legitimate thought about cultural and social identity. The owl tells the truth, Evans literally revealed his thought process through his body, the past was migrated into the present of performance via dramaturgy. The author created his work through thinking and feeling which became externally apparent via

kinetic melodies that represented a repertoire of dynamic relationships. Such dynamic relationships return us to Maaïke Bleeker who states that, 'Creating a theatre or dance performance, therefore, is to stage a constantly shifting set of relationships from which the performance emerges'.⁶² While Evans was producing his thinking through action, and it was clearly his thought, the ensemble took up this thinking in action and allowed each thought a personal embodied trajectory and response and as Bleeker explains, 'Just as language games open up intellectual spaces that emerge from our engagement with language, so too does dance invite us to enter spaces that appear for us as experience only through our engagement with what is being presented'.⁶³ At this point of accepting the invitation to enter into Evans' embodied thought in action, the ideas expanded and emerged through ensemble performance as 'autonomous entities materialised in a medium' and, Evans' thoughts '...became no-one's individually'.⁶⁴

The obligatory demand of *communitas* is an insistence on response to others who share similar ambitions. Understood through Esposito's comments on the contemporary problem of community and nihilism, of geo-political boundaries and conflict, of destruction and death, I suggest that this work is a counterpoint. We resist both the desire for immunity from the contagion of others and their cultural contexts and practices and the contemporary realities of geo-political and ideological violence, along with a specific UK manifestation of extreme *immunitas* in the discourses around migration. Through theatre making, the ensemble might seek new manifestations and creative responses that reveal how people often on the margins of social contexts bring new information to the experience of community. Bleeker suggests how the need to understand what is being thought and communicated in creative work can be met by using art historian Hubert Damisch's discussion about perspective in painting. She uses his formulation with regards to dance, 'Grasping this logic of these relationships is grasping the thought about space that is represented by the painting'.⁶⁵ We grasp the relational logic of the ensemble in its practice and so too the audience is invited to enter this world within its own terms. The logic of *Gwdihw* offered an experience of a world whose inhabitants extended an invitation to think with their material and more usefully, to 'think in between' person and material, space and gesture. This then might be where a gentle dissolution of Esposito's *immunitas* begins with regards to a need to exclude the Other that is learning disability, or to suggest inclusion into an assumed desirable community of the competent. Thinking in between, with people not credited with the capacity for thought, is where the art of theatrical performance, with its inherent command to see and behold, becomes the embodied political proposition I suggested at the beginning of this essay. If we think in between, think with and share the aesthetic embodied propositions of people with learning disabilities there is no further need for inclusivity, for we do not exclude in the first place. Disability activists draw attention to the exclusionary practices of our social environments, such as stairs, narrow doorways and kerbs, and point out that everyone could get into a building with ramps, without distinction and the assumption of a particular normality. Dramaturgy seen through Bleeker's account creates a context where everyone involved thinks through theatre rather than assuming that some of us can think better than others, challenging those of us without learning disability to enter the world of authors with this impairment. The territory of aesthetic thought has the potential to challenge exclusionary boundaries and to open up radical visions that are yet to be acknowledged within the canon of art histories because of hierarchies of the proper, that determine who makes and enters historical taxonomies of art, and who becomes significant and influential. Thinking through learning disability theatre opens the possibility for new articulations of aesthetics that might in turn become significant and influential in the development of theatre and dance. It is the aesthetic form that carries its own force of presence and action, and theorists of dramaturgy suggest ways to move beyond representation within theatre and beyond the rhetoric of exclusion/inclusion that reproduces hierarchical definitions of person and competence.

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